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ABSTRACT

An approach to reducing stress in student teachers, known as the Circle, incorporates the basic strategies of group counseling. The Circle is comprised of a small group of students gathered in a relaxed atmosphere for the purpose of sharing new teaching experiences common to all. The accepting, nurturing attitude of the Circle creates an environment where candid discussion of problems and successes can be productive. Discussion sessions focus upon getting individuals attuned to their positive and negative thoughts and emotions, clarifying individual self-concepts and understanding of responsibilities, and encouraging development of personal competence in social interaction. (JD)

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PROCESSING THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF THE PRESERVICE TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

This is a description of an affective education program (Magic Circle/ Human Development Program) as adapted to the seminar setting for use with pre-service teachers. It gives a rationale and description of how the university supervisor could use the process as a stress preventative technique with pre-service teachers.

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Processing The Emotional Needs Of
The Preservice Teacher

Introduction

At the mid-term several of the student teachers were experiencing fatigue, tension, and depression, all stress related symptoms. The cooperating teachers of the students saw evidence that the student teacher's performance was being adversely affected. The university supervisor was made aware of the situation but was not sure how to best address the problem.

Does this scenario sound familiar? The prevention of stress may best be remedied by utilizing a process which fosters strong mental health as a component of the clinical preparation of teachers. But for far too many of us involved in the preparation of future educators, our seminars have lacked a viable process by which professor and students could engage in supportive, meaningful dialogue about the concerns, frustrations, and successes which occur during student teaching.

Student Teacher Stress

The student teacher has unique tasks. Often this is the student's first opportunity to operationalize the communication and pedagogical skills they have been acquiring in their education courses. Student teachers are expected to identify and articulate the problems and successes they encounter in their dealings with pupils and cooperating teachers. Often sophomores and juniors are involved in a clinical role of "not quite student teacher."

Throughout the clinical experience of pre-service teachers there is a need to help students process the variety of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

that occur during the field experience. Most seminars do not provide a structure that allows for a supportive, nurturing exploration of the field experience. At best, most seminars are hit and miss attempts to help the students come to grips with a crucial phase in their professional development. The need for a stress preventative program that addresses the affective needs of a teacher in training is explained by Martray, Cangemi and Craig (1977) with the statement that "the psychological well-being necessary for effective teaching cannot be achieved indirectly but must be developed as a part of the teacher preparation experience." (p. 161)

Of the various approaches to mental health education that teachers use with children, the Magic Circle/Human Development Program (Bessell, Palamores, 1973) can easily be modified and adapted to meet the mental health needs of educators. The Circle session is a readily learned technique that used the group process to develop mental health in children. Although its use with adults has not been extensive, Firth's (1974) research on teacher inservice training suggests that it is effective.

CIRCLE SESSIONS: A STRESS PREVENTION PROCESS

The Circle session incorporates the basic strategy of group counseling, but with certain modifications to allow a teacher to do a Circle within the regular classroom setting. The teacher works with a group of eight to thirteen students in a circle for about twenty to thirty minutes. The leader gives a topic for the session and the members of the group relate their experiences as suggested by the topic. For example, with pre-service teachers, a topic such as "Something That Happened in a Lesson That Made Me Feel Good," or "A Behavior Problem I Dealt With" would be appropriate.

The author has used this process with students at the junior and senior level of student teaching. The students' response has been most favorable. The students find the experience on excellent opportunity to gain support from members of the group. They find the Circle a very stimulating and cathartic experience.

Students in the Circle have discussed problems they've encountered during their clinical experience. The accepting, nurturing atmosphere of the Circle creates an environment where such candid discussion can be productive. Group support and potential solutions that are generated are most effective in changing distressful situations to productive, meaningful learning experiences.

Also, students report that the Circle affords them an opportunity to articulate the joy and insights that occur during this critical phase of professional development. During one Circle a senior disclosed that the support and encouragement she had received during Circle was instrumental to the feeling of competency and confidence she had developed during the semester.

The first step in a Circle is called setting the tone. The leader invites the group to join in a circle and the group is given a few seconds to focus on the upcoming experience. A word of welcome or acknowledgement may be given to the participants to relax them and set the mood of acceptance.

The topic is introduced during the second phase of a Circle. The leader might state a topic "Something I Do Well in the Classroom" then clarify and expand on the topic by giving a few examples. "Maybe you command attention or perhaps you give children meaningful, positive feedback." The introduction and explanation of the topic takes one to two minutes. The group is now ready for the sharing phase.

To facilitate the sharing process, five rules are obeyed in a Circle: 1) Everyone gets a turn, including the leader; 2) No one is put down; 3) The time is shared equally; 4) You can skip your turn; 5) Everyone gets listened to. With these rules in mind, the participants, who wish to speak, can respond to the topic by relating an experience. The leader and group respect each individual's right to privacy. In a Circle there is no pressure or tactics employed to force people to take a turn. The participants usually spend a minute of two explaining what happened to them and articulating their feelings about the experience.

After each participant has had an opportunity to share, the leader moves into the cognition phase. The group spends a minute or two summarizing the content of the sharing phase. The leader may accomplish this by asking the group what was similar or what was different about what was shared; or the leader may ask the participants to comment on what they learned from the Circle. After this brief summation the leader brings the Circle to closure by thanking the participants.

"Awareness, Mastery, and Social Interaction" are the three themes that the theory of the Human Development Program is based upon. These three themes are very applicable to the student teaching experience and stress prevention. Awareness, as a topic, attempts to get individuals attuned to their positive and negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The student teacher is placed in a role where unfamiliar thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are occurring at an astonishing rate each day. A time to identify and reflect on these in a nurturing atmosphere will allow the teacher to interpret the positive ones and come to grips with the negative ones.

A few examples of awareness topics are: "My Feeling When I Took Over The Whole Group," "Something That I Did That Made a Student Feel Good/Bad," "Something I Think I Can Achieve During Student Teaching." Although the authors of the program have generated many topics for teachers to use with children, the use of Circles with student teachers is new and there does not exist a curriculum guide for this population from which the university supervisor may draw. Existing H.D.P./Magic Circle curriculum guides can serve as spring boards and topics can be modified for use in the seminar. The students can also be a source of potential topics they would like to see addressed in a Circle. It is imperative that the university professor have a topic developed before beginning a Circle to ensure that the Circle will have a definite focus and direction.

The theme of Mastery is related to self-concepts and responsibility. A successful student teaching experience may be characterized as one where the student develops a feeling of competence and success. The theme of Mastery provides cues that allow the students to articulate what they've done well and how they feel about it. This theme can also be used to initiate problem-solving approaches for those teaching behaviors the students haven't acquired. The process of the Circle allows the students to express their accomplishments in a straightforward, responsible manner. As the student teacher realized the many things that he or she can do well, confidence and self-concept are enhanced and potential sources of stress can be identified and alleviated.

Mastery topics that might be used in seminar are: "Something I Can Do Very Well in Classroom," "There is One Thing I Need Improvement on as a Teacher," "A New Technique I've Learned." When using Mastery topics the leader may wish to take a minute after each participant has shared and elicit suggestions for improvement for each participant if the topic deals with skills the student teacher needs to work on.

The third theme revolves around Social Interaction. In the ultimate sense educators are in a "people business." The student teacher is experiencing a variety of professional and social relationships that are entirely new. At this point in their professional development the relationships established with administrators, other teachers, children, and parents will serve as the basis for the student teacher's future relationships. Topics presented on social interaction give the students an opportunity to analyze those relationships and discover what aspects and qualities are mutually satisfying and promote positive growth. The nuances and interactions that have been undermining relationship building, and a source of stress, can be examined in a non-threatening way.

To develop the theme of Social Interaction the leader could use topics such as: "I Lost My Temper," "A Student Did Something Very Nice for Me," "How I Made Sure Everyone Was Included." Social interaction topics are centered around the issues of control, inclusion, and affection in relationships.

Conclusion

Psychological well-being may be developed as a result of participating in a Circle. That well-being is a result of the sharing and learning which occurs during the process. As each individual member contributes, the rest of the group is listening and gaining information through the experiences of the contributor. The realization that the other members of the group are also experiencing potentially stressful situations can be critical in helping the student teacher adjust the variety of threats to mental health which occur during clinical education.

Jersild (1955) has pointed out that a "Teacher's understanding and acceptance of himself is the most important requirement in any effort he makes to help his students. . ." (p. 7)

An experience like Circle sessions provides a teacher in training an opportunity to gain that understanding and acceptance in that phase of professional development when it is most needed. The alleviation of stress in teachers must be on going and preventive in nature. Developing a mentally healthy teacher at the pre-service level is the logical place to start.

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